



Tuition assistance is essential to developing a well-rounded, educated NCO corps. Soldiers' education strengthens the Army and prepares them for future challenges. (U.S. Army photo)

Tuition Assistance is Necessary for Well-Rounded Education

By Robert F. Williams, Ph.D.

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The liberal arts are essential to a well-rounded education, especially for the Army's tactical and technical experts — the NCOs. The April 2024 report about the Army's desire to reexamine and potentially cut the tuition assistance program is at odds with the sort of professional force the Army purports itself to be (Beynon, 2024). Fortunately, the Army decided to maintain the program and increase the available funding by \$500 per year (Hurd, 2024).

One thing is sure: A college-educated NCO corps is critical to all the Chief of Staff's priorities. By strengthening the profession through education, we can

enhance warfighting skills and prepare for transformation to deliver combat-ready formations (Winkie, 2023).

The Harding Project, an Army Chief of Staff initiative aimed at developing professional writing across the force, would seemingly then only focus on officers as opposed to enlisted and NCOs (Griffiths & Lipsky, 2023).

The Army needs to use programs like tuition assistance to encourage NCOs to earn a more balanced education, which will assist them as both leaders and citizens in an Army and a country with an uncertain future.

The Army's NCOs are some of the smartest in the world, and they're encouraged to write in all Army

professional publications — not just the *NCO Journal* but also *Military Review* — and branch journals.

Cutting their ability to access higher education through tuition assistance and similar programs would have the adverse effect of widening the gap between the educated officer class and the traditionally lesser-educated enlisted class.

I don't think that's what the Chief of Staff of the Army wants, and I certainly don't believe that's the direction the Army wants to go. However, those would be the second- and third-order effects that any decision to cut tuition assistance would bring.

Furthermore, college education is an important part of NCO self-development. The Army seeks Soldiers who are adaptive learners and critical thinkers. Individuals demonstrate these skill sets through a willingness to complete college coursework.

Centralized NCO Evaluation Board After Action Reviews (AARs) highlight that those NCOs who pursue higher education demonstrate a commitment to self-development and recommend that Soldiers continue to seek civilian education (McLachlan, 2024; Department of the Army, 2023a; Department of the Army, 2023b; Department of the Army, 2023c; and Department of the Army, 2022).

Furthermore, it's also important for first-term Soldiers to get a few college courses under their belt so

that when they use their GI Bill afterward, they have a few semesters completed — giving them a leg up when they leave the Army.

Personally, the tuition assistance program is a major reason why I was able to earn a doctorate in history when I left the service. My educational journey began by taking classes online while deployed to Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in 2008. From there, I took regular eight-week classes online until I achieved first my associate degree and later a total of 80 credit hours toward a bachelor's degree.

Those credits were critical when I transferred to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, allowing me to complete my bachelor's in roughly 18 months. From there, since I still had GI Bill benefits remaining, I went to graduate school at Ohio State — something I don't think I would've even thought of if I'd had to spend a full four years at Chapel Hill.

Tuition assistance and taking classes while on active duty were critical for me to succeed outside of uniformed service. With so many veterans leaving the military and having a tough time finding purpose, an easy program like tuition assistance should be simple enough to maintain to assist them when they transition.

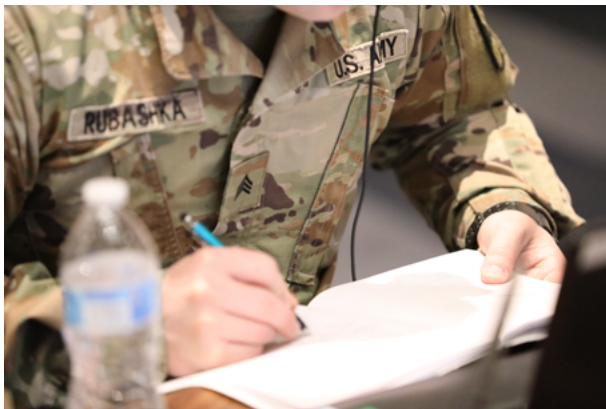
The cost is relatively low for the return. According to Army veteran-turned-journalist Steve Beynon's (2024) reporting, "about 101,000 soldiers across all Army



Connie Schauer, education services specialist, speaks with Soldiers who stopped by the 88th Readiness Division Education Center at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, June 7, 2021. The Army needs to use programs like tuition assistance to encourage NCOs to earn a more balanced education, which will assist them as both leaders and citizens. (U.S. Army photo by Zachary Mott)



ABOVE: Sgt. Nikolle Moncada, Area Support Group – Kuwait (ASG-KU), shakes hands with Lt. Col. Christopher Nohle, commander, ASG-KU, during the college graduate recognition ceremony at Camp Beuhring, Kuwait, June 30, 2023. Taking classes while on active duty is critical for Soldiers to succeed outside of uniformed service. (U.S. Army photo by Claudia LaMantia)



AT LEFT: College education is an important part of NCO self-development. The Army seeks Soldiers who are adaptive learners and critical thinkers. Individuals demonstrate these skill sets through a willingness to complete college coursework. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Kelly Wiebe)

components use the benefit each year — averaging about \$218 million in cost” since 2020. That sum is paltry when compared to the billions spent on failed initiatives such as the Future Combat System (Library of Congress, 2009) or the RAH-66 Comanche attack helicopter (Hollings, 2021).

A college education teaches critical thinking and creates more well-rounded human beings, an outcome needed by an Army more in transition than ever. The future is uncertain, as it always is, and an uncertain future requires Soldiers at all echelons who can read, think, act, and write coherently and critically to solve complex problems. Fostering broad critical thinkers through college education funded by the Army’s tuition assistance program is essential to maintaining a well-rounded force.

Certainly, the program should be scrutinized, especially regarding the sorts of universities that stand to benefit from its continuation. Many for-profit universities are incredibly predatory in nature and should be reined in. I was lucky that UNC-Chapel Hill mostly accepted credit from the for-profit but regionally accredited American Military University.

However, we can’t count the net positive that this benefit brings to the force in simple dollars and cents. Instead, the benefit is in the long-term prospects of Soldiers, both during their time in service and afterward as citizens of the U.S. The Army owes it to itself and to the nation to foster a well-rounded, intellectually curious, and intelligent NCO corps. ■

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